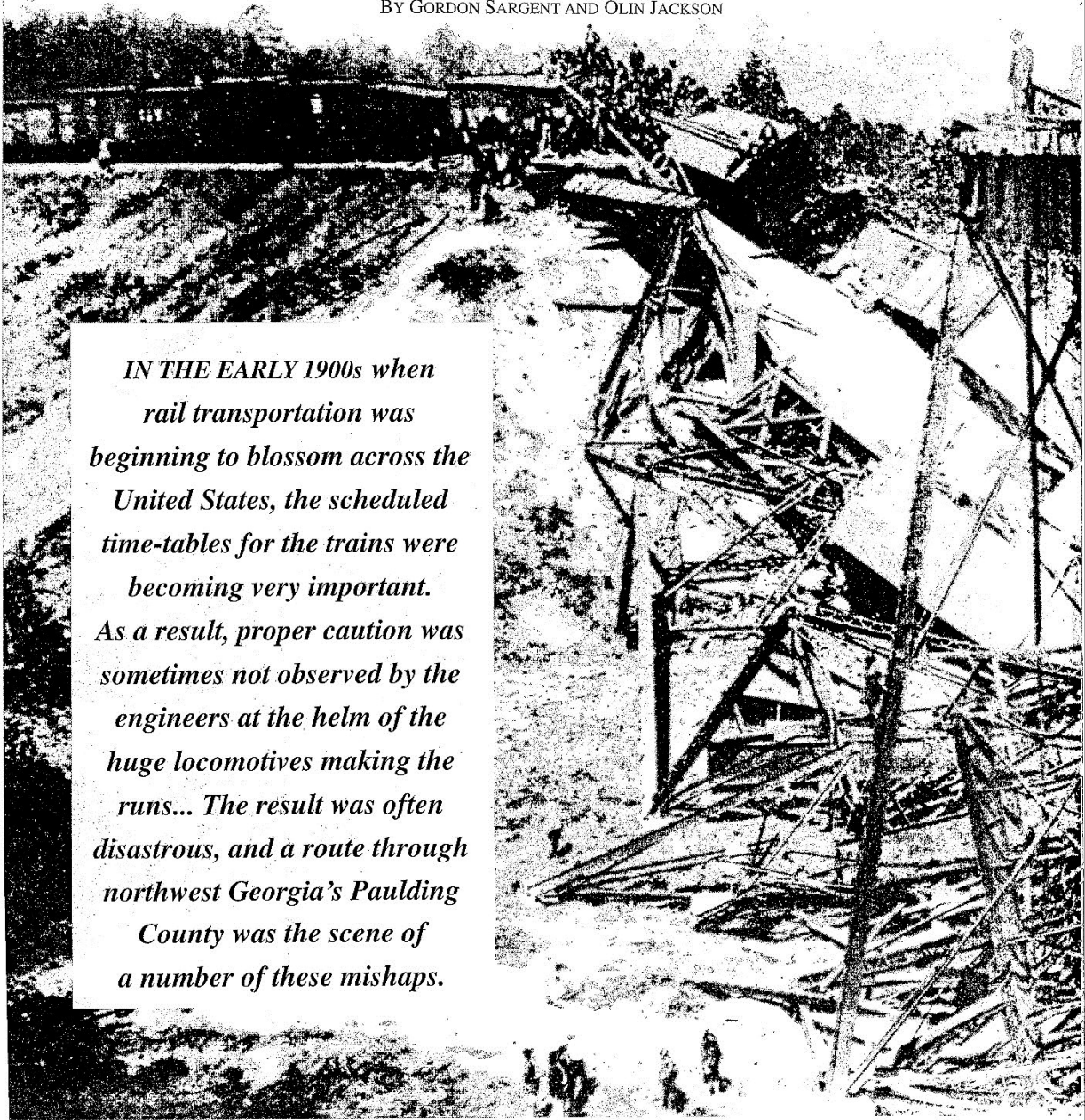


Disaster At Paulding County's Pumpkinvine Creek

The Mysterious Wreck of No.81

BY GORDON SARGENT AND OLIN JACKSON

IN THE EARLY 1900s when rail transportation was beginning to blossom across the United States, the scheduled time-tables for the trains were becoming very important. As a result, proper caution was sometimes not observed by the engineers at the helm of the huge locomotives making the runs... The result was often disastrous, and a route through northwest Georgia's Paulding County was the scene of a number of these mishaps.



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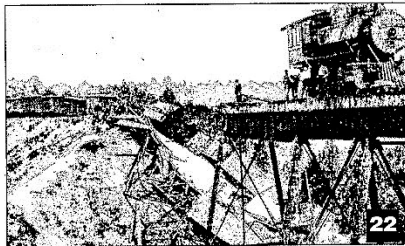
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Only a few people remain who can remember the blazing gunfight in an attempted bank robbery in downtown Dahlonega in 1913.

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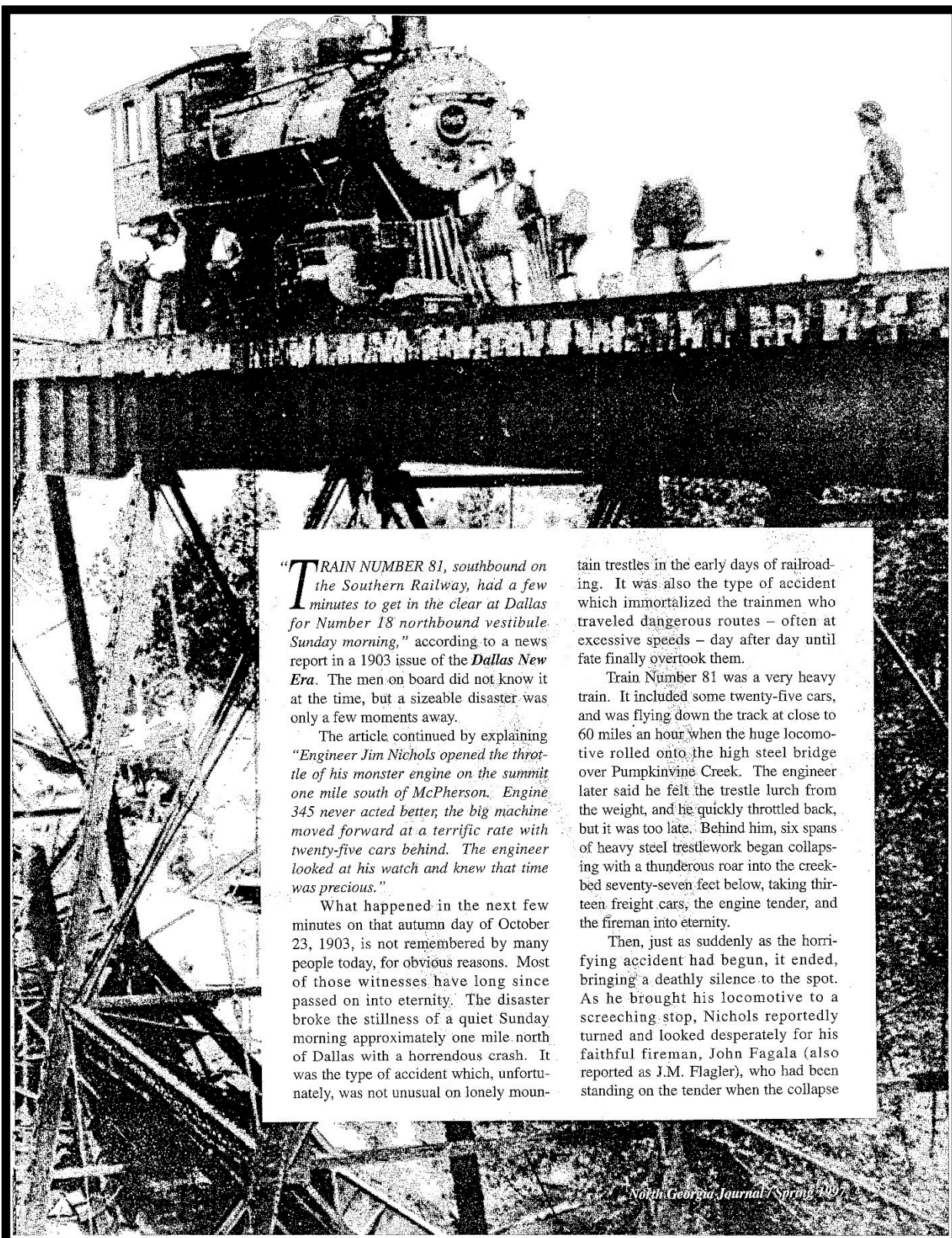
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From the ashes of a grand mountain hotel has arisen a wonderful restaurant that is attracting new attention.

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Berry College again ranks as one of the top 100 best college buys.



"TRAIN NUMBER 81, southbound on the Southern Railway, had a few minutes to get in the clear at Dallas for Number 18 northbound vestibule Sunday morning," according to a news report in a 1903 issue of the Dallas New Era. The men on board did not know it at the time, but a sizeable disaster was only a few moments away.

The article continued by explaining "Engineer Jim Nichols opened the throttle of his monster engine on the summit one mile south of McPherson. Engine 345 never acted better, the big machine moved forward at a terrific rate with twenty-five cars behind. The engineer looked at his watch and knew that time was precious."

What happened in the next few minutes on that autumn day of October 23, 1903, is not remembered by many people today, for obvious reasons. Most of those witnesses have long since passed on into eternity. The disaster broke the stillness of a quiet Sunday morning approximately one mile north of Dallas with a horrendous crash. It was the type of accident which, unfortunately, was not unusual on lonely moun-

tain trestles in the early days of railroading. It was also the type of accident which immortalized the trainmen who traveled dangerous routes – often at excessive speeds – day after day until fate finally overtook them.

Train Number 81 was a very heavy train. It included some twenty-five cars, and was flying down the track at close to 60 miles an hour when the huge locomotive rolled onto the high steel bridge over Pumpkinvine Creek. The engineer later said he felt the trestle lurch from the weight, and he quickly throttled back, but it was too late. Behind him, six spans of heavy steel trestlework began collapsing with a thunderous roar into the creek-bed seventy-seven feet below, taking thirteen freight cars, the engine tender, and the fireman into eternity.

Then, just as suddenly as the horrifying accident had begun, it ended, bringing a deathly silence to the spot. As he brought his locomotive to a screeching stop, Nichols reportedly turned and looked desperately for his faithful fireman, John Fagala (also reported as J.M. Flagler), who had been standing on the tender when the collapse

*"They were goin' down grade making
ninety miles an hour.
When the whistle broke into a scream —
He was found in the wreck with his hand
on the throttle,
Scalded to death by the steam."*

— From "The Wreck Of Old 97"

began. After a quick but futile search around the locomotive, Nichols next went back to the edge of the high broken trestle where his eyes landed upon the sight he feared he would find in the ravine below.

The tender had been ripped from the engine coupling as the track collapsed beneath it. It was lying far below in a tangle of trestle steel.

Misculously, the last cars of the train had remained on the track on the opposite side. Consequently, the conductor and flagman in the caboose survived the devastation without a scratch.

The 360-foot bridge across Pumpkinvine Creek was one of the longest and highest in this section. It had safely carried hundreds of fast trains in the late 1800s. Today, no one knows what caused the bridge to collapse, but many individuals knowledgeable of rail accidents have speculated on the cause. One report indicated the large locomotive had simply been traveling too fast and had jumped the rails on the curved trestle, leading the cars behind it to devastation.

"The first time I heard of the Pumpkinvine trestle collapsing was from Mr. Paul McDonald, Southern Railway's third trick operator at Rockmart," explains Duane "Cowboy" Mintz, a retired conductor on Southern (today's Norfolk-Southern) Railway, who says he passed back and forth across the Pumpkinvine Creek trestle continuously during his career. "Later, after I went to work for Southern, I mentioned the incident while dead-heading to Chattanooga on (Train) Number 32, Rockmart's four o'clock train in the afternoon. I was rebuffed by some of the veteran railroaders for

passing on tales they had never heard of. The old head conductor, Mr. E.E. (Emmett) Whittle, however, came to my rescue. 'The boy is right,' he told them. 'It happened not long after I went to work (for Southern). I almost quit the railroad on account of it.'"

The Pumpkinvine Creek trestle is located on the line between Atlanta, Georgia and Chattanooga, Tennessee on the route known as the "Georgia Division" of Southern Railway. Even today, trains pass over a steel trestle (one of the longest and highest on the division) at this same site above the creek many times a day. "I, as well as a lot of others, never did like crossing it," Mintz adds. "I personally don't like any trestle that is built as part of a curve like that one is."

The Dallas to Rockmart portion of the Georgia Division has long been a dangerous one. As a part of the Atlanta to Chattanooga line in Southern Railway's network it was completed on July 1, 1882. There have been at least four major disasters on the Dallas to Rockmart segment alone in the past 90 years, and possibly numerous others.

Break-neck speed and a tight railroad time-table undoubtedly were major factors in several of the incidents. In 1902, Southern Railway obtained a contract to haul the mail between Washington, D.C. and Atlanta, Georgia, on the New York to New Orleans line. The U.S. government wanted the best means possible for quick transport of the mails, and fast locomotives were the answer. In return, Southern Railway earned \$140,000 a year for this service. In those days, that was big money.

But it was a double-edged sword. If Southern Railway couldn't keep up with

the schedule, it was penalized \$100.00 for every thirty minutes the mail was late at every destination. That was more than enough incentive for rail management to put heavy pressure on trainmen to maintain schedules. This often meant exceeding the speed limit by many miles an hour more than the speed for which a stretch of rails and their supporting components (such as trestles) were designed. And the fact that some trains were traveling on dangerous stretches of track to begin with, only added to the propensity for disaster.

One such example is the stretch of tracks between Dallas, Georgia and Rockmart. On the evening of December 23, 1926, on the outskirts of Rockmart, the Ponce de Leon passenger train, traveling in excess of 50 miles per hour, collided head-on with the Royal Palm passenger train (Readers please see *A North Georgia Journal of History*, Vol. III, "The Wreck of the Royal Palm.") with devastating results. There were at least 19 and possibly 20 or more fatalities (the exact number is unknown today). At least 113 passengers, 4 Southern Railway employees and 6 Pullman employees were injured. This wreck remains on record as one of the worst disasters in the history of the railroad in the United States.

Another accident (on that same dangerous stretch between Dallas and Rockmart) which caused the death of several individuals occurred nearby at Big Raccoon Creek trestle in February of 1883. The bridgework at this site was practically new at that time, and railroad historians have long pondered the reason for its collapse. "It's just another of the many puzzling events in the annals of railroading in the early days," relates Mintz, matter-of-factly.

The 44-year veteran of the rails served on the Georgia Division Safety Committee of Southern Railway for ten years. "I wrote, printed and distributed a safety newsletter, and one of the articles I carried in the newsletter was a description of the Big Raccoon Creek accident," he smiles.

The trestle at Big Raccoon Creek is seven miles north of Dallas. As Mr. Mintz describes in his newsletter, the creek is comparatively small but the creekbed is significantly deep with high

bluffs on either side. At the time of the accident, the trestle was a three-deck trestle, spanning 1,480 feet from bluff to bluff and rising 94 feet from the creekbed.

Mr. Mintz's newsletter article of this disaster, reprinted from a news report in the February 22, 1883 issue of the *Dallas, Georgia New Era* newspaper, described the accident as follows: "Last Saturday morning, about 10:30 a.m., as Train Number 39, a through-freight of the E.T.V. & G. R.R. (East Tennessee, Virginia & Georgia Railroad) was leaving the switch at the tunnel, south-bound, Conductor Bob Shoemaker boarded the engine, as it was convenient for him at the time, and (he) remarked to his engineer that he would ride with him down to Dallas rather than drop back to his caboose.

"All went well until the train, running at the rate of 7 or 8 miles an hour, ran upon Big Raccoon Trestle. . . Having passed across to within a few yards of the south side with his engine, Mr. Neesley gave her a little more steam in order to pull over the grade immediately in front. Almost immediately, a severe shock being felt, Mr. Shoemaker, apprehending the cause and looking back, shouted, 'Pull her open! Pull her open! The bridge is going!' . . . The terrible crash that followed left them standing upon the very brink of a yawning abyss — the bottom of which was covered with rains, all within a moment of time.

"The (collapsed) section consisted of ten or eleven cars laden with merchandise, and the caboose. There were three men in the caboose and a negro brakeman about midway of the train. . . The unfortunate brakeman was killed outright. Mr. R.P. Kidwell . . . was on board, enroute to Atlanta to visit his family. He too was so fatally injured that death came as a relief to his sufferings very soon after being removed from the debris to the car in waiting. Mr. John Cox . . . also in the caboose, sustained injuries that proved fatal to him, living until Saturday night totally unconscious all the while. Mr. Charles Camp, flagman . . . remained unconscious for several hours, then awoke to the realization of his remarkable escape . . . (He had) a scalp wound, a crushed



ankle, and a dislocated elbow, (but he was alive!)."

The heavy train had passed across the trestle until the caboose was immediately over the creek. At that point, according to the news account printed in the *New Era*, section after section of the trestle began giving way somewhere near the center of the train. The general collapse of the trestle was very similar to the collapse of the trestle just six or seven miles away at Pumpkinvine Creek in 1903.

The 360-foot trestle across Pumpkinvine had safely carried hundreds of fast trains over the years. The cause of its collapse is still unknown also, but the news account in the 1903 *New Era* speculates upon the possibilities. "Some think train wreckers had removed a rail causing the wreck, while others believe that the high rate of speed caused the terrible disaster," the newspaper intoned.

Mr. Mintz says he doesn't think a missing rail caused the accident. "If a rail had been missing, the whole engine would have gone over the side of the trestle, and it wouldn't have caused much

The trestle at Pumpkinvine collapsed because of the high rate of speed which still passes daily. (Photo by Gordon S. Brown)

(Previous page) Pumpkinvine trestle collapsed because of the high rate of speed which still passes daily. (Photo by Gordon S. Brown)

denied collapsed because of the high rate of speed which still passes daily. (Photo by Gordon S. Brown)

A very similar disaster killed the first Fagala. Engineer Jim got his locomotive — stable portion of the trestle damage," the "I think simple caused both the Pumpkinvine Creek was highly publicized in the United States, by Southern Railway. The wreck occurred in Danville, the subject for a is still remembered by enthusiasts today. "Steve" Brown Old 97, was pushing

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and faster to make up lost time. Witnesses claim the train reached ninety miles an hour as the 80-ton behemoth swept down a grade and struck the "curved" timber trestle. Reportedly, a flange on one of the wheels broke off, and the engine with its cars plunged seventy-five feet into the creek below.

Twelve of the nineteen individuals on board Old 97 were killed. The engineer and fireman were found with the skin flayed from their bodies by the super-heated steam from the crushed boiler. It was a fate from which the engineer at Pumpkinvine Creek had mercifully been spared.

Whatever the cause of the wreck at Pumpkinvine, rail officials were determined not to allow the accident to keep the line out of service any longer than absolutely necessary. Service between Chattanooga and Atlanta was temporarily rerouted through Rome, while a huge work crew labored feverishly to repair the damage. Every hour the line remained out of service represented a great financial loss for Southern.

"Two wrecking crews reached the

scene about 12:00 p.m., six hours after the occurrence, and more than two hundred men were clearing away the debris," the *Dallas New Era* explained.

Even this amount of man-power, however, apparently was not enough, and still more men were dispatched to the site to help. Working around the clock, the men had the track and trestle repaired three days after the disaster. By Wednesday morning, the first train steamed safely over the repaired bridge, heading north to Chattanooga.

Once the wreckage had been cleared away and the repairs had been made, the scene at Pumpkinvine Creek quickly returned to normal. Previously on that fateful Sunday, sightseers had streamed out of Dallas to view the site of the disaster. And with the crowds came scavengers who dug through the wreckage in search of booty.

The atmosphere, no doubt, was like a country carnival. The crushed freight cars had spilled their cargoes of corn, oats, cotton, and apples, and according to one wag, a load of Bull Durham tobacco. It was reported with some

mirth, that virtually every boy in Paulding County learned to smoke as a result of this wreck.

Meanwhile, in a community northward, the festivities were not quite so lively. A railroader—the poor fireman at the Pumpkinvine Creek accident—had been killed, and in sleepy Varnell, Georgia, near the Tennessee state line, a grieving wife and two small children received their loved one home from the railroad for the last time. ■

(The author and the *North Georgia Journal* gratefully acknowledge the assistance provided by Duane "Cowboy" Mintz and Ruddy Ellis in the accumulation of information necessary for this article. Individuals seeking additional information concerning the history of Paulding County may also be interested in *Paulding County: Its People & Places* by Judge W.A. Foster III. Copies of this publication may be obtained for \$35 each by writing to Mrs. Ira Foster, 1041 Merchants Drive, Dallas, Georgia, 30132.)



The Southern Railroad Depot in Rockmart, Georgia, as it appeared in the early 1900s. Rockmart was the next major stop on the Southern Railroad after Dallas, Georgia.

(Below) On December 23, 1926, a horrendous collision between the Ponce de Leon and Royal Palm passenger trains resulted in one of the worst rail disasters in U.S. history. This accident in Rockmart, Georgia, occurred not far from the Pumpkinvine Creek disaster site, and was responsible for the death of at least nineteen individuals (the exact number is still unknown today).

(Photo courtesy of the Atlanta History Center)

